

2007 POST SESSION WRAP UP

The 24th Legislature addressed a number of important issues during the Regular Session of 2007. Below are some of the highlights.

Providing tax relief to Hawaii's most needy individuals and families:

The Legislature went beyond the requirements of the State Constitution to return excess revenues by providing meaningful tax relief to Hawaii's most needy. Senate Bill No. 148 provides a tax credit between \$25 to \$160 to those with incomes under \$60,000 for couples filing jointly or heads of household, and under \$30,000 for individual taxpayers.

Additional tax relief was provided in the form of a Refundable Food/Excise Tax Credit, furthering the tax benefits to those most in need. Senate Bill No. 1882 provides a tax credit between \$25 and \$85 to those with incomes under \$50,000.

Expanding access to shelter and affordable housing:

Housing and homelessness is a topic of concern of Hawaii's residents that the House Democrats placed as a top priority this session. A number of bills were passed to help the homeless and to provide more affordable housing options. Senate Bill No. 1917 comprehensively addressed these issues by:

- Extending the 50 percent allocation of the conveyance tax to the Rental Housing Trust Fund for an additional year;
- Appropriating \$14,000,000 for the construction and development for affordable housing; and
- Appropriating \$6,000,000 for various homeless and housing programs and services.

In addition to the provisions in Senate Bill No. 1917, the State Budget also appropriated \$25,000,000 for public housing repairs, maintenance, improvements, and renovations, \$4,350,000 in each of the next two fiscal years for homeless services, and \$5,000,000 for elevator modernization at public housing projects.

House Democrats were also dedicated to preserving the existing inventory of affordable housing units. Kukui Gardens, one of the state's largest affordable housing complexes, was offered for sale and its tenants were in jeopardy of losing their homes. The Legislature passed House Bill No. 667, authorizing the issuance of up to \$25,000,000 in general obligation bonds for the acquisition and financing of a portion of the land and improvements of the Kukui Gardens property.

Ensuring the availability of essential health care, including services to Hawaii's keiki and emergency medical services:

Health care was one of the House Democrat's top priorities, particularly health care for children and the needy, ensuring access to care in rural areas, and taking steps to control the cost of health insurance.

House Democrats spearheaded the effort to pass a comprehensive "Keiki Care" bill, House Bill No. 1008, that established programs to provide health care coverage to Hawaii's needy children from birth to 18 years of age. This bill ensured that medical care would be provided at no charge to children from families of lower income.

The Legislature worked together with the public and other stakeholders to ensure the continued operations of Kahuku Hospital, which recently filed for bankruptcy and was on the verge of closure. House Bill No. 843 enabled Kahuku Hospital to continue to provide services to the North Shore and Windward Oahu communities by:

- Appropriating \$950,000 to its continue operations and settle its debts; and
- Requiring the Hawaii Health Systems Corporation to acquire Kahuku Hospital.

The skyrocketing cost of Insurance continues to be a concern to both employers and employees in Hawaii. The Legislature took steps to control health insurance rates through Senate Bill No. 12, which prohibits excessive, inadequate, or unfairly discriminatory health insurance rates, and establishes other provisions to ensure fair health insurance rates.

Strengthening Hawaii's disaster preparedness and response capabilities and supporting programs that protect our natural resources:

Several measures were passed that will prevent future disasters such as the incident at Kaloko Dam and will also help to prepare for natural disasters and emergencies such as the October 15, 2006 Kiholo Bay earthquakes.

Senate Bill No. 1946 takes a comprehensive approach in ensuring the safety of dams and reservoirs in the State by improving maintenance and monitoring of dams and reservoirs, and establishing provisions in the event an emergency occurs. The Legislature also responded to those who were affected by the Kiholo Bay Earthquakes by providing emergency appropriations to assist with disaster recovery efforts statewide in House Bill No. 1345.

Existing programs such as the Deposit Beverage Container Program were improved by passing Senate Bill No. 1026, which addresses the public's concerns regarding the operating hours of certain redemption centers and allowing larger containers to be recycled. Additionally, the fight against invasive species was furthered in Senate Bill No. 1066, which worked toward preventing the entry of invasive species to the islands.

Improving educational programs and infrastructure within the Department of Education and University of Hawaii:

The Legislature recognized the growing need for educational programs that prepare students for the workplace. Senate Bill No. 885 established, expanded, and appropriated funds for programs in the fields of agriculture, culinary arts, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. This measure also provided teachers with the opportunity to improve their skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

House Democrats worked together and with their Senate colleagues to pass significant measures to benefit all of Hawaii. For more details, please refer to the "Measures Passed Legislature" on the Hawaii State Legislature Website, www.capitol.hawaii.gov, under the "Bill Status & Docs" link.